

GODFREY GOODWIN

## GARDENS OF THE DEAD IN OTTOMAN TIMES

The world is decrepit and will not last. Today I am called.  
Tomorrow will be your turn.

From the Fiftieth Discourse of  
Jalaladdin Rumi, trans. Arberry.

The Ottoman approach to death was influenced by a Turkic Shamanist past and by the many faiths of Central Asia during the period of Mongol dominance.<sup>1</sup> The gardens of death are the heroes of this tale at a time when a garden was more an orchard or a grove of trees, watered by a pool and perhaps endowed with a view. It was not a colorscape of flowerbeds. If in Ottoman society they were altogether freer and more informal than in Persia, formal gardens did exist, and architecture and garden, including burial stones and retreats for prayer, were interwoven as much in Anatolia and the Balkans as anywhere else in Islam.<sup>2</sup>

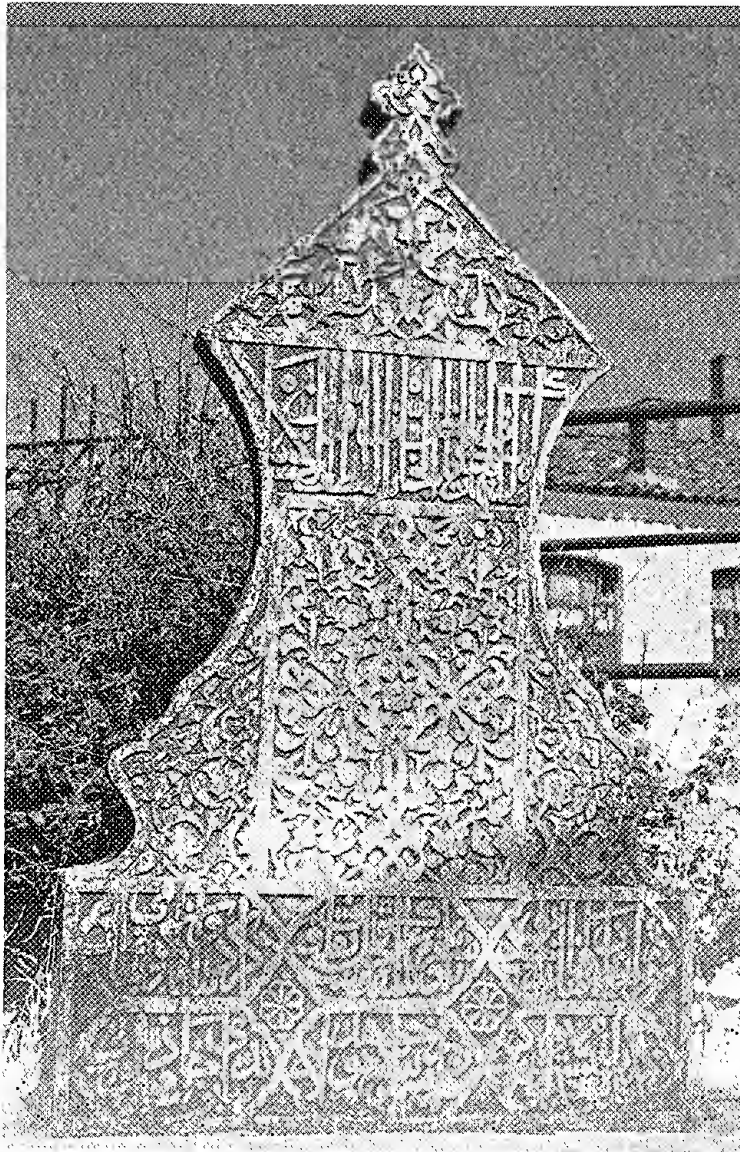
The burial of the Prophet in the house of one of his wives established the concept of the mausoleum,<sup>3</sup> and so of the *türbe*, as a distinct element in Islamic and so Ottoman architecture. But for every one of these memorials, myriad humbler stones were raised. A man is a speck among many, which makes ambition foolish, yet paradoxically creates a mystical sense of selfhood deriving from God's unity. The worshiper knows that the great will also perish and that therefore he must not cringe, for he is bound to God alone to Whom he totally submits. It is for this reason that the date of a human birth is insignificant, but that of a death is important.

Avicenna believed that the soul existed in its own right and would survive death. Yet sura 36 of the Quran may be felt to contradict this philosophy, and it is of course this sura that is recited at the last possible moment by the imam just before the sick man confesses the faith for the last time.<sup>4</sup> When life is done, camphor should be inserted in the orifices, and the corpse enshrouded in a white sheet. The cries of woe which are such a humane relief for the grief-stricken also serve to frighten away the forces of evil. Meanwhile, the nearest relative closes the eyes of the dead and, if a soldier, lays his sword upon his stomach.<sup>5</sup>

Then the body is washed, and it is noteworthy that there is a special room set aside at the hospital of Bayazit II at Edirne, as there is in the household hospital at Topkapı Sarayı, for this task.<sup>6</sup> That burial is performed next day is a rule deriving from a hot climate and is not simply due to tradition. Indeed, in Central Asia a sacred burial ground might involve a journey of thirty to sixty days. Traveling in the desert, Vámbéry encountered terrible cries and a growing stench that terrified his companions. Out of the evening shadows loomed the ghastly sight of the caravan of the dead with some forty horses and mules, each with a coffin on either flank, looking wild-eyed and deeply distressed. Their drivers were three wretches, compelled by poverty to take on the task and then branded for life and unable to get any other job, who tried to drive on their beasts by cries and keep at a distance from the terrible stench. It was a foul journey in summer, and the sight was nightmare-provoking when seen by moonlight.<sup>7</sup>

An Ottoman funeral had to be simple with the *turban* placed on the body on a stretcher, which was covered by a simple piece of cloth or by robes brought back from the hajj if the man had made the pilgrimage. The dead man was carried in silence by relays of four friends, while others made their last farewells by touching the bier. There were to be no laments, and women were excluded from the burial procession, as were all foreigners and unbelievers. It was permitted to rest if the walk to the burial place was long,<sup>8</sup> and one can still see bearers in Turkey pausing for a glass of tea on the way to the cemetery, while the stretcher rests across two chairs. It rests again outside the mosque, often on the capitals of columns,<sup>9</sup> while short prayers are uttered inside.

Initially, there were to be no stones or masonry on



1. Gazi Yakut Bey tombstone, Çerdek, Çanakkale.

a grave, which was covered in flowers and sometimes was planted with a myrtle as is the case with a baba's tomb in a niche in a wall of a house in the Citadel at Bursa. But such strict rules were disregarded. With the very poorest, the porters might lift off the sheet with their teeth and bury the dead naked. But the rule that no two bodies might be buried in the same grave is still observed, and it is taboo to walk or sit on a grave. Nor may a corpse be cut open, even to recover gemstones.<sup>10</sup> It will be appreciated that these rules are older than Islam and emerge from a shamanist past, as may the curious tradition that men's graves can be as deep as they were tall in life, but those of women need only be breast high.

The place of the dead is a garden, and its dominant feature is the cypress tree. It is also planted in Christian

cemeteries, but Ottoman poets make clear that they do not see these trees as dark or mournful, for they often refer to them as striding and cavorting cheerfully, calling to each other, as indeed their tops do if there is a breeze.<sup>11</sup> An engraving by Coecke van Aelst of an Edirne burial in the sixteenth century also shows the curious custom, at least in the Balkans, of climbing the tree planted by a grave after a year. The deceased whose tree has grown tallest is said to be the nearest to Heaven and so the noblest soul in the garden.<sup>12</sup>

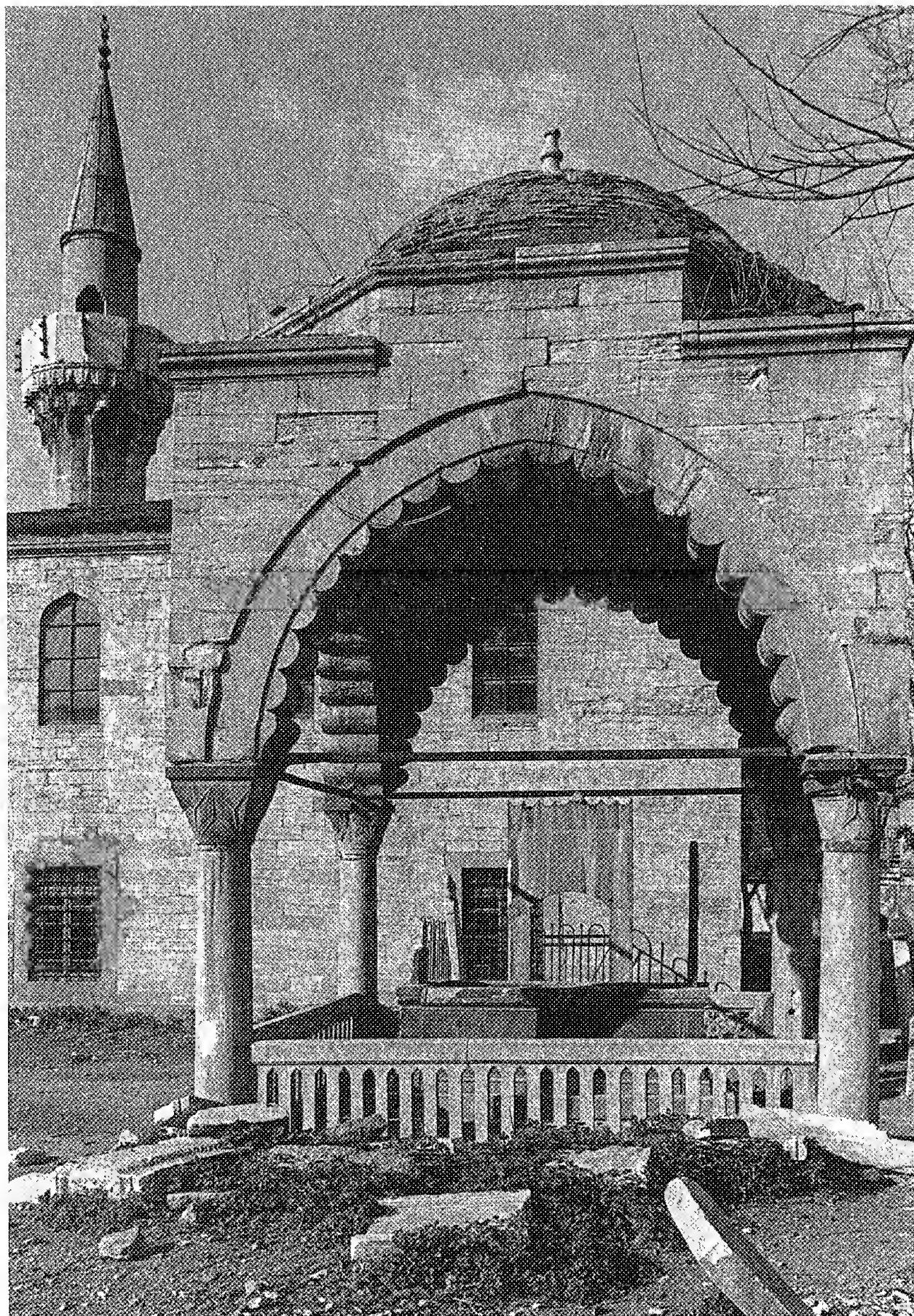
It is no more an ordinary garden than is the courtyard of a mosque. There is the splendid mosaic garden of the Great Mosque of Damascus to light the way from the earliest days of the Faith to those superb flower tiles from Iznik which make gardens of the interiors of the grander Ottoman mosques. One has only to think of the soaring qibla wall of the Sokollu Mehmet Paşa Cami in Istanbul or the humbler dadoes of faraway provincial mosques such as that of Bayram Paşa at Diyarbakır to know that these are attempts to re-create the Garden of Paradise. But whereas at Damascus the great rivers were depicted together with the Pavilions of the Blessed,<sup>13</sup> in Ottoman mosques the gardens are more symbolic than realistic, consisting of stylized flowers and leaves.

Burial places are equally reflections of Paradise, the ultimate destination of a believer, and they were more so when the tombstones were painted. The men's tall tombstones topped with the turban of their rank have a floral quality because of the inscriptions (figs. 1, 5): for calligraphy has been compared to flowers. The women's headstones, of course, were extensively carved with blooms, and the miniature stones of the children have all the charmed melancholy of lives cut off in the bud.

Memorial stones last long, but often longer than they ought, for whereas it is impious to set them up again according to tradition, for they fall by God's will, the recent restoration of the immense Süleymaniye Külliye in Istanbul has resulted in the cleaning and re-erection of the patrician tombstones there. All such grandeur is far removed from the fields of poor Anatolian villages scattered with stones seemingly at random where the only flowers are wild.

The traveler and ambassador, Busbequius,<sup>14</sup> journeying from Istanbul to Amasya in the 1550's, reported the custom of dragging columns or slabs of marble from a distance so as to cover tombs of relatives which would otherwise be exposed, because Turks did not fill graves with earth so that the corpse would be





2. Open türbe of the founder, Defterdar Cami, Istanbul.

able to rise and plead his case. But dogs, wolves, and especially hyenas dug bodies out of unprotected tombs.

In Ottoman Turkey and more precisely Istanbul, the cemeteries are monumental and form great parks, but türbes do not dominate as, for example, the monuments of the great do in the City of the Dead at Cairo. This is not for reasons of social distinction, but because the wealthy wished to be buried and remembered within the complex that they had endowed for the good of their souls (fig. 2).

In Seljuq times a royal benefactor could be interred within his charitable foundation. The Menjukid Amir Ahmed Şah was buried in his hospital at Divriği, and the Seljuqid Kaykavuş I in his hospital at Sivas. The more usual custom was to abut the tomb to the mosque as with the 'Ala'eddin Cami at Konya, but Eretna, the Mongol governor, raised his mother's türbe in the middle of his hunting lodge—if it was a hunting lodge—the misnamed Köşk Medrese outside Kayseri. Exceptionally, the türbe of Hand Hatun in the same city cuts into the corner of her mosque simply for lack of space. Ottomans were to borrow unlikely buildings for türbes due to haste or disregard for the personage entombed, as with the mad sultans Mustafa I and Ibrahim who are buried in the former baptistery of Hagia Sophia.

It was therefore for the good of their souls that the tombs of the great viziers were not erected in public burial grounds except when the place was as sanctified as Eyüp at the head of the Golden Horn, where türbes such as those of Siyavuş and Pertev pashas and several late-eighteenth-century princesses seek proximity to the sepulcher of the standard bearer of the Prophet. These major tombs are restricted to the valley; those of the multitude of less famous personages cover the slopes of the hill to enjoy the view. For death in Islam is a poetic concept, since poetry means the disciplining of words just as gardens emerge from the disciplining of nature. Inscriptions on tombstones may select elements from a life, but most surely will be in verse and dwell on symbolic virtues.

Islam is concerned with the word and with a metaphysical relationship with death. It could not produce the realism of the skull-capped tombstones of the great monastery at Padula, let alone the awful monument "Le Squelette" carved by Ligier-Richter in the church at Bar-le-Duc. Spirits were another matter. Evliya Çelebi, who enjoyed the park and garden qualities of cemeteries, was prone to encountering ghosts. While he was exploring the curious hillside covered with the flat tombstones of the Jews of Hasköy

on the Golden Horn, one rose up and gave him a particular fright. Tombs of saints and remarkable men were always visited throughout Islam, and Evliya saw all he could when he reached a town, for he was the archetypical tourist.<sup>15</sup>

The Seljuq *kumbad* (Persian: *gunbad*), with its conical roof and the Ottoman domed türbe alike recall the grave-tent<sup>16</sup> and the mountain, when they are set on the shores of Lake Van against sky and water while echoing the foothills and the Massif behind them. When Ibn Battuta traveled to Anatolia in the 1330's, his first encounter with a royal death was that of an amir's son. He arrived in time to hear the lamentations calling on Divine Mercy and to proceed with the ruler and the prince's fellow students to the burial. These mourners visited the tomb for three consecutive days after the dawn prayers. This simple ceremonial reminded the traveler of the customs of Syria and Egypt.<sup>17</sup>

But elsewhere the Mongol influence was stronger, and he was indeed upset when he was taken by the qadis to the ceremonies of condolence, for the audience hall was filled with youths, slaves, sons of princes, viziers, soldiers, all in coarse sacks, their heads covered with dust and straw, and all crying out, "Our Master!"<sup>18</sup> Then he visited the Sarukhan at the mausoleum of his son who had died some months before and where he and the boy's mother spent each evening and each morning. The prince had been embalmed and put into a wooden coffin, with a lid of tinned iron, which rested on trestles in the middle of the tomb, which was still roofless to let the smell of death escape. Later the coffin was to be placed upon the ground and covered with his clothes, and then the türbe would be domed.<sup>19</sup> Embalming and the hanging of coffins in trees<sup>20</sup> were Central Asian traditions where the burial of the great was associated with God's mountains and trees, which are still potent symbols of Shamanism. Until twenty years ago, the embalmed body of the Turumtaş amir of Amasya was exposed naked in the vault of his türbe revealing by the contortion of his features that he had died of a stroke.

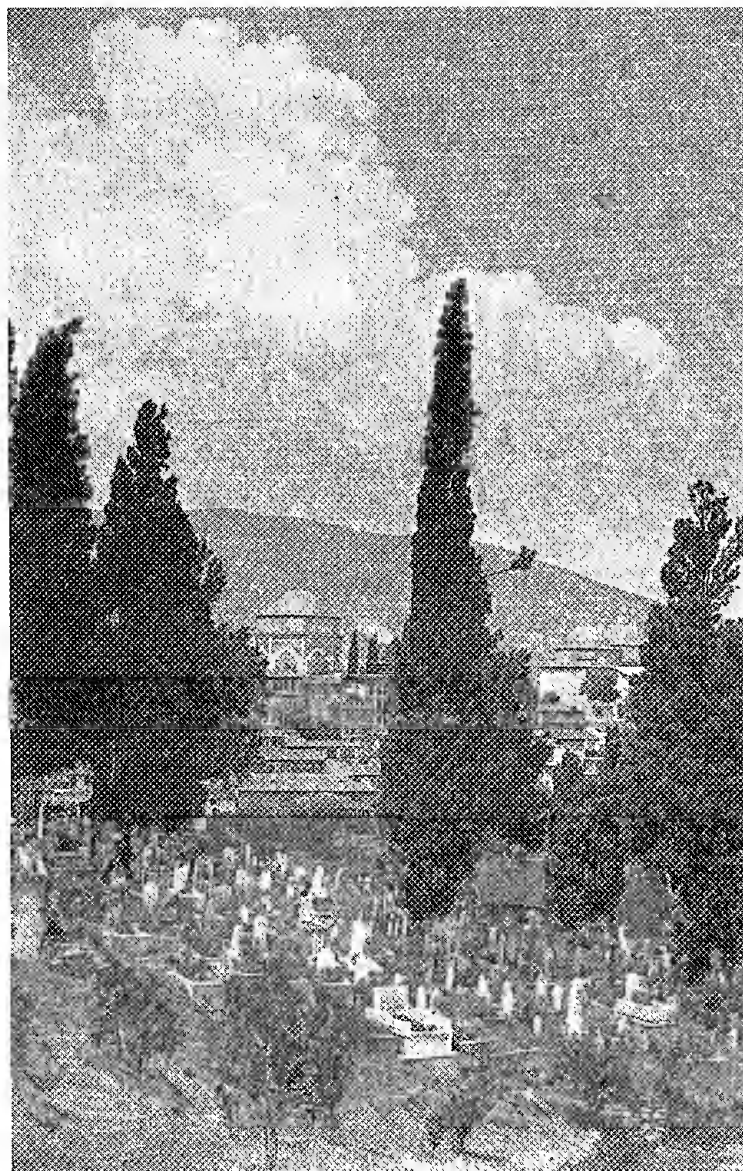
Central Asian society was among the oldest known to practice ceremonial burials, and memories of these customs were brought to Seljuq Anatolia by the Babas of the Turkic steppe whence they continued to be reinforced. J. P. Roux records that those in quest of longevity prayed to the sky—Gök—and to the mountain—Tanğridağ. In the thirteenth century, Buddhists, Taoists, and Nestorians were exempt from tax if they prayed for the health of the emperor to thwart

the evil spirits that caused death. However, death in battle was preferable to growing decrepit, and the truly great—and all shamans naturally—would rise up to the sky without actually dying. With simpler mortals there was a feast for three days after death. No cats or spiders were allowed in the funeral room until the soul had flown away disguised as a bird or even a fly. Thus it is easy to see how ancestor worship flourished and led to belief in ghosts and even to the contracting of marriages after death in the same way as they were validated before birth.<sup>21</sup>

Man is never more superstitious than in the face of death, so given ceremonials which were both Islamic and pre-Islamic some of the puzzling aspects of Seljuq kumbads and Ottoman graves are more easily understood. On some of these tents in stone, as with the Döner Kumbad at Kayseri, mythical creatures and spirits were depicted and then defaced because of the fears that they awoke in the uneducated.

It was in Iran that the mihrab was admitted to the tomb in spite of the strict requirement that no one should pray to the dead, a rule frequently broken in front of the catafalque of Jalāladdin Rumi and other venerated saints. For this reason *türbehanes* were built with vast complexes like that of the Süleymaniye in Istanbul as separate halls where prayers might be raised for the repose of the souls of the dead. The mihrab, not least the monumental example in the Yeşil türbe of Mehmet I at Bursa (fig. 3), was the symbol of the Gate of Heaven<sup>22</sup> through which the deceased must hope to pass.

It is this hope that motivates the visits to tombs by survivors at Bayrams together with feasts and temporary encampments, but the Osmanlı cousin who lived in the family tomb in the graveyard of the Fatih Cami in Istanbul was guilty of sacrilege. The Turkish department of conservation has turned the sebîl, or water or sherbet kiosk, attached to the open tomb of the Hacı Mehmet Emin Ağa at Dolmabahçe into a pavement café less heinously. Nonetheless, the drink should be free, which it is not. Even the continual prayers for their souls for which the sultans financed their türbes are no longer offered, and the tasbihs have gone. But if the oil lamps are in museums, the stumps of the unlit candles are left in the big holders at the head and foot of the catafalques, though the tomb covers have withered away to be replaced by bairse cloth or garish contemporary materials and the turbans are of cheap cotton. As for the poor, boys play and quarrel in the smaller graveyards and nobody rebukes their



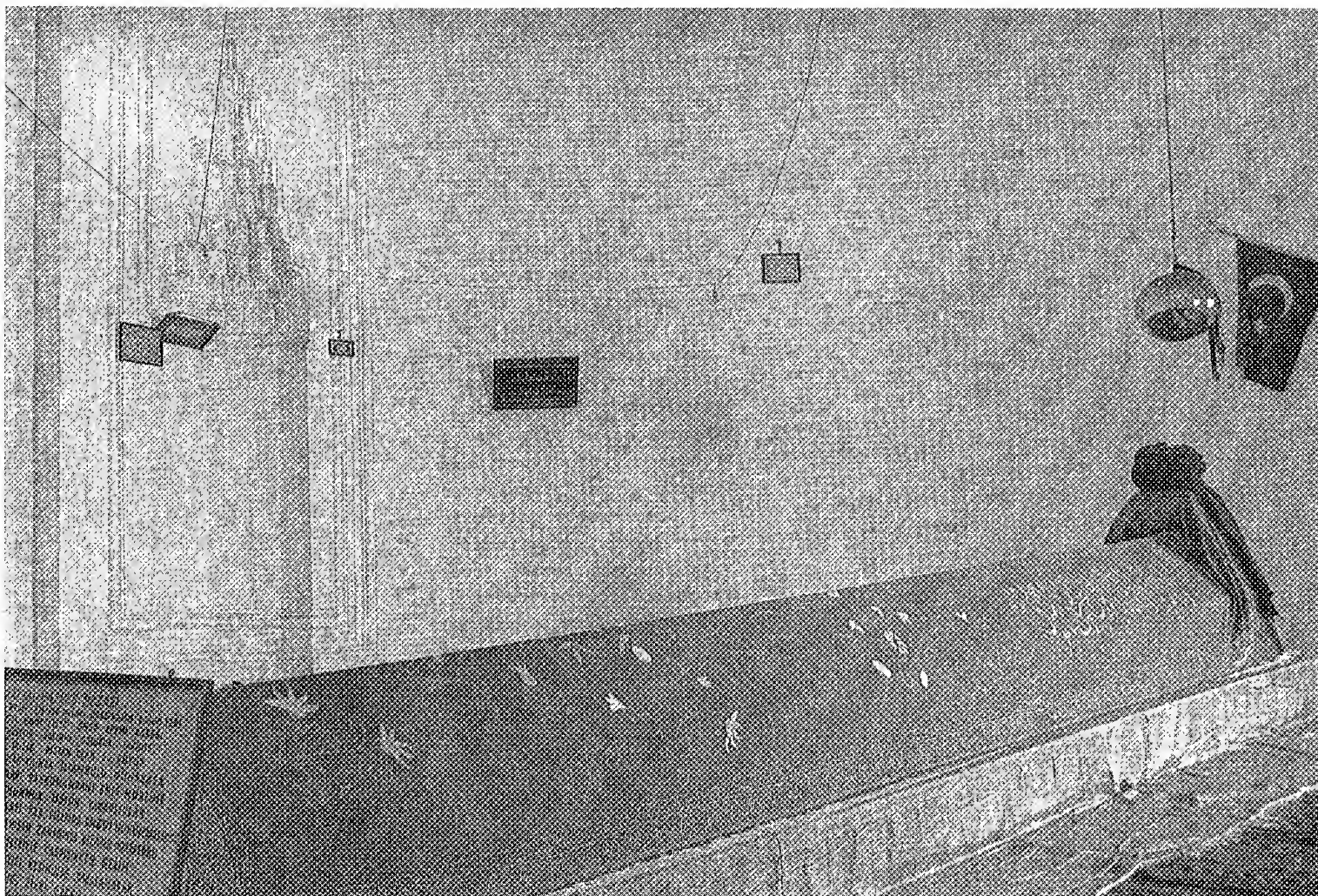
3. Emir Sultan Cemetery looking toward Yeşil Cami and türbe, Bursa.

irreverence. They are not so brutal as Murad IV, who intemperately kicked the türbe of Yıldırım Bayazıt, who was defeated and captured by Timur in 1402, to mark his contempt for an ancestor whom he certainly did not revere.

Moreover, all türbes are not what they seem. Geoffrey Lewis has recorded that at Rumeli Hisarı superstitious students facing their examinations climb the hill to the Bektaşî tekke to pray for the intervention of the Baba, but the only türbe there is that of a major general of no particular piety.<sup>23</sup>

What survives from all this is the concept of the garden as with the türbes of Bursa, where the green dapples evoke the paradisaical meadows and the poetry





4. Sarcophagus of Batal Seyyid Gazi in the Bektaşî Tekkesi near Eskişehir.

of words and flowers and trees. The türbe of Murat II, however, is grand but austere and sets a mystical example, for its grave is a plot of earth under an oculus in the dome so that rain may fall on what is now impiously barren but intended for a flowerbed. The Sufî essence of this concept needs no exposition.

More striking, however, was the concept of size. The Yeşil Türbe is immense, as is the richly tiled catafalque on a dais which is a meadow of green ceramic. Even when a decline in wealth in the seventeenth century led to the building of more modest complexes by Ottoman potentates, the mausolea remained large so that those of Bayram Paşa<sup>24</sup> or the luckless Kara Mustafa Paşa<sup>25</sup> are as large as their mosques. Even larger is that of Mihrişah Sultan at Eyüp, built in 1796, and this size—so incommensurate with achievement—continued until the last royal türbe, that of Mehmet V Reşad by the water at Eyüp.

By the end of the seventeenth century there was a fashion for an open ironwork dome to the türbe such as that of the great Köprülü Grand Vizier at Çembelitaş.<sup>26</sup> Legend says that the ghost of the minister appeared to his sultan in his dreams to complain of burning heat. The troubled and sleepless prince consulted his wisest advisers, but they could find him no respite until a genius among them suggested taking the lead dome off the tomb to admit the fire-quenching rain. These open türbes remained large, but no palace for the dead could compete with the immense sepulcher of Uljaitu at Sultaniyye. It would appear to have been a monstrous boast had it not been intended for the bodies of the two imams in order to lure pilgrims to the then capital city.

The size of his coffin was also a measure of man's greatness, and so that of the heroic Seyyid Gazi in the Bektaşî convent near Eskişehir (fig. 4) measures eight

meters in length,<sup>27</sup> thus outdoing the massive proportions of the catafalque of Selim I. But the size of the memorial mosque of Şehzade is a measure simply of paternal grief which the poetic türbe transmutes into the sublime, for its walls are encrusted with cuerda seca flower panels in meadow green, yellow, and cobalt which in the soft light create a garden as near to heaven as human skills can achieve, and the wooden rail encrusted with mother-of-pearl, ivory, and tortoiseshell is a case for that songbird that is the prince's immortal soul. Süleyman I's own tomb is larger and grander, and the tiles are Iznik at their finest, yet it lacks this emotional mystery, but the nearby tomb of his wife Hasseki Hürrem is as light as her husband's is dark, an orchard of almond blossom that is as lyrical an experience as an architect can contrive.

The outer court of the Şehzade mosque is the venue for a fertility cult of great antiquity. Barren women come to stick pebbles on a cistern, eat cakes brought by fortunate mothers under a great tree, and at the first note of the call to prayer at noon run to be the first to touch the southwest minaret. Thus a zest for life triumphs over the memorial to death.

Of trees and Shamanism an arresting example shelters the wayside tomb of a nameless saint on the road from Bodrum to Milas. The branches are hung with colorful rags to attract the attention of Heaven to the prayers of the humble. More touching still are the stones piled at the door of the türbe of Piyale Paşa (fig. 5), the great Ottoman admiral, in the outer garden of his large mosque beyond the suburb of Kasimpaşa. One stone laid across two smaller supports indicates the hope of finding a simple croft to live in; a second layer set on top of the first is a prayer for a house. Three stories or more represent a block of flats, and the essential candle is left burning on the floor preferred. Thus the superstitions of migrant villagers reach the city. Why the old sailor should be interested in housing is unclear but the custom indicates that some prayers are answered.<sup>28</sup>

It is fitting to conclude with the ceremonial that followed upon the death of Murat III, which was recorded both by Marco Vernier and John Sanderson. Murat died on January 7, 1595, but in secret, else the city would have been sacked by the Janissaries. Mehmet III arrived on the 27th on a typical Istanbul day which began with sunshine and fair weather and turned to rain and finally snow. He walked up through the gardens from the sea kiosk to receive the salaams of his viziers in the Throne Room. Then the nineteen other

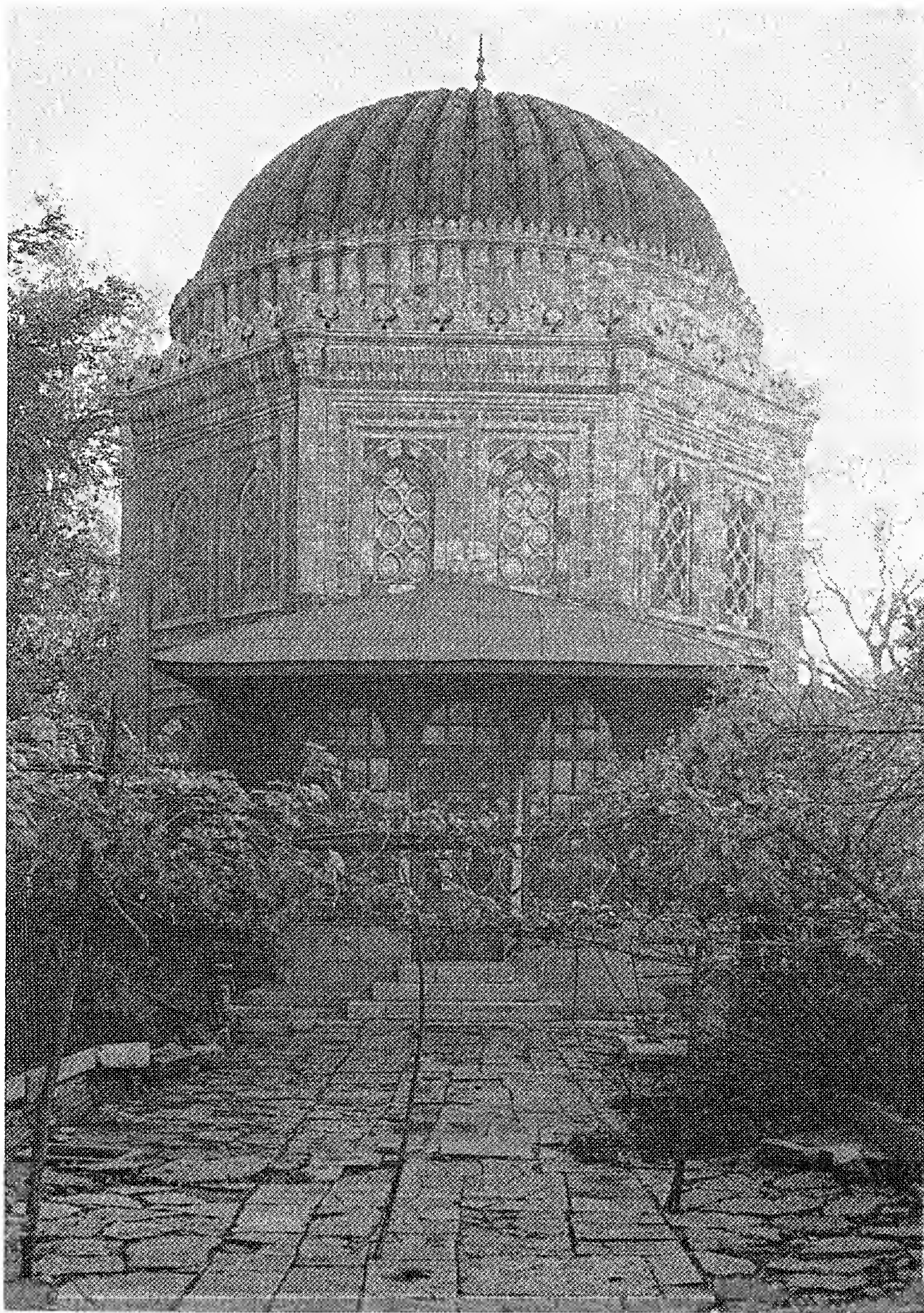


5. Interior of Piyale Paşa Cami türbe, Istanbul.

sons of Murat were brought before him one by one. Of these the eldest was eleven years old and the best loved of his father because he was the most handsome, which could not be said of fat Mehmet. His plea to his lord and brother that his life should not be ended thus in this his tender age could not be heeded by the head of a house that had suffered too much from fraternal conflicts.<sup>29</sup> Mehmet was either silent and tore his beard with grief, or he explained that he had called the boys to their circumcision. They were indeed piously circumcised before being throttled with silk handkerchiefs to avoid the spilling of royal blood. There was no time to wash their bodies, which were placed in plain coffins.<sup>30</sup>

At ten in the evening, Murat's corpse was carried head foremost on a bier of cypress wood, covered in a cloth of silk and gold thread. It was inscribed all over and had come from Medina where it had covered the tomb of the Prophet. The body was strapped down with a jeweled belt of gold, and in its turban were stuck the egrets of his rank as the Shadow of God on Earth. The new sultan went only to the first door of the Sarayi while the procession proceeded to the precincts of Hagia Sophia. In front were the notables in black and





6. Şehzade Mehmet Turbesi, Şehzade Camı, İstanbul



bearing palms. Their turbans were small and woolen as a sign of mourning, and some were covered in black veils. There was no pomp, and significantly the coffin was placed under Murat's sumptuous military tent until the türbe and its tragic annex for the slaughtered princes could be speedily erected.<sup>31</sup>

Next morning the dead boys were paraded in their coffins in the Divan Court and at noon were taken to rejoin their father in order of age, followed by the same procession of mourners as had assembled the day before. Finally, the four mutes who had been their stranglers were themselves strangled, but not with silk.<sup>32</sup>

Beside Murat's tomb is the türbe of Selim II, which Sinan, the architect of the greatest of Ottoman mosques, built for his master. The noblest of all Ottoman türbes and related to the Selimiye with its eight piers, it was endowed with tiles, lamps, and ornaments which were the product of Ottoman craftsmanship at its peak. As in the mausoleum of Şehzade Mehmet (fig. 6), he who circumambulates this tomb is walking in the fields of Paradise.

Royal Asiatic Society  
London, England

## NOTES

1. S. Vles-Reden, *The Realm of the Great Goddess* (London, 1961), p. 10.
2. Godfrey Goodwin, "Landscape in Ottoman Art," in: *Landscape Style in Asia*, ed. W. Watson (Colloquies on Art and Archaeology in Asia 9) (London: Percival David Foundation, 1979), pp. 138-49.
3. Oleg Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art* (New Haven, 1973), p. 108.
4. A. J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (Oxford, 1964), pp. 450-55.
5. A. E. Castellan, *Histoire pittoresque de la Turquie*, vol. 5 (Paris, n.d.), pp. 221 et seq.
6. Godfrey Goodwin, *A History of Ottoman Architecture* (London, 1971), p. 149.
7. Á. Vámbéry, *Sketches of Central Asia, Additional Chapters* (London, 1868), pp. 88-91.
8. Castellan, *Histoire pittoresque*, p. 222.
9. In Istanbul often Byzantine capitals, as at Hagia Sophia.
10. Castellan, *Histoire pittoresque*, pp. 220 et seq. Two corpses could be buried in one grave if they were separated by earth. Corpses were always placed on their right side facing Mecca.
11. Nermin Menemencioglu, *Penguin Book of Turkish Verse* (Harmondsworth, 1978), for example. Castellan, *Histoire pittoresque*, p. 326, makes clear that myrtle should be planted on a grave, as it is on the splendid Baba's in a recess by a lane at the Bursa Citadel.
12. P. Coecke van Aelst, *Ces moeurs et fachons de faire de Turcs ...* (1553).
13. This is to take sides in a controversy, but I cannot believe that the faithful Damascenes wanted views of Wimbledon or Dedham in mosaic in their principal house of prayer.
14. His embassy from the Emperor to Süleyman I in 1554 at Amasya gave him an important insight into the state of the Ottoman Empire at its zenith; see O. G. Busbequius, *The Four Epistles concerning His Embassy at Turkey* (London, 1694), p. 48.
15. Evliya Çelebi, trans. Ritter J. von Hammer, *Narrative of Travels...*, vol. 1, pt. 2, p. 42.
16. J. P. Roux, *La mort chez les peuples altaïques anciens et médiévaux* (Paris, 1963), p. 55, reports on a tent being pitched over the corpse of his Grand Shaman at the orders of Ghengis Khan.
17. H. A. R. Gibb, *The Travels of Ibn Battuta, A.D. 1325-1354* (Cambridge, 1955), pp. 423-24. The great traveler from the Maghrib visited almost every province of Islam and kept a highly accurate account of his travels.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 290.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 447.
20. J. Hastings, *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. 4 (Oxford, 1912), p. 421; on desiccation, see Roux, *Mort chez les peuples altaïques*, p. 158.
21. Roux, *Mort chez les peuples altaïques*, for detailed account of Mongol attitudes to death and complete picture of rituals of death.
22. Grabar, *Formation of Islamic Art*, p. 121.
23. Ferik Ahmet Celal Paşa, son of Ahmet Bey of Kavalla, 1845-1917; see G. Lewis, "The Saint and the Major General," *Anatolian Studies* 22 (1972),: 249-53.
24. Bayram Paşa Külliye, 1624.
25. Kara Mustafa Paşa Külliye, 1669-90; it was completed by his son. The pasha was disfigured by exploding gunpowder when fighting a fire from a boat on the Golden Horn and was beheaded for failing to take Vienna in 1683.
26. Köprülü Külliye, built 1659-60.
27. My own rough-and-ready measurement.
28. Piyale Paşa Külliye, 1573. The iman of this mosque in 1960 explained that every morning he kicked the stones down in his effort to suppress idolatry.
29. Contrary to Islamic tradition, the house of Osman preferred succession by the eldest son. On the monarch's death, a messenger was sent to the designated heir who was usually governor at Manisa. Mehmet II's law of fratricide was vague, but stated, "And to whomsoever of my sons the sultanate shall pass, it is fitting that for the order of the world he shall kill his brothers. Most of the ulema allow it. So let them act on this." See Ta'rihi 'Osmānī Encümeni Mecmū'asi (Istanbul, 1912), vol. 14, appendix 27, "Kānūn-nāmei 'Āli Osmān." Ahmet I was to ignore the law, to his lasting credit, upon his accession in 1603.
30. H. E. Rosedale, *Queen Elizabeth and the Levant Company* (London, 1904), pp. 24 et seq.
31. J. Sanderson, *The Travels of John Sanderson in the Levant, 1584-1602*, ed. Foster (London, 1931), p. 141.
32. Rosedale, *Queen Elizabeth and the Levant Company*, p. 28.